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Master-planned estates and suburban complexity

Abstract

The establishment of new residential neighbourhoods - by builders, developers, government and residents - has been one of the defining features of twentieth century suburbs in general and western Sydney in particular. Recent years have witnessed a number of changes in the processes establishing these neighbourhoods: in the organisations and relationships providing them; in the political and planning processes governing their provision; in the ideologies underpinning them; and in the practices of everyday life constituting them. One of the more recent forms of residential neighbourhood is seen to exemplify these changes: master-planned communities, master-planned residential developments, or, in our preferred terminology, master-planned estates. They are becoming increasingly popular to both local and state governments, and developers, as a means of residential provision. A recent national conference aimed at developers and local planners, for instance, positioned them as 'the key to handling rapidly growing population pressure in outer suburban areas' (<http://www.halledit.com.au/conferences/mpud/>). It appears they are also increasingly popular in everyday suburban life, meeting an apparently burgeoning consumer demand (Minnery and Bajracharya, 1999) and intersecting with residents concerns for privacy, safety and property values. Master-planned estates (or MPEs) have become similarly popular across western Sydney, as will become evident in the examples we use throughout this paper.

Keywords

estates, suburban, planned, complexity, master

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Master-planned Estates and Suburban Complexity

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Introduction¹

The establishment of new residential neighbourhoods – by builders, developers, government and residents – has been one of the defining features of twentieth century suburbs in general and western Sydney in particular. Recent years have witnessed a number of changes in the processes establishing these neighbourhoods: in the organisations and relationships providing them; in the political and planning processes governing their provision; in the ideologies underpinning them; and in the practices of everyday life constituting them. One of the more recent forms of residential neighbourhood is seen to exemplify these changes: master-planned communities, master-planned residential developments, or, in our preferred terminology, master-planned estates. They are becoming increasingly popular to both local and state governments, and developers, as a means of residential provision. A recent national conference aimed at developers and local planners, for instance, positioned them as ‘the key to handling rapidly growing population pressure in outer suburban areas’ (<http://www.halledit.com.au/conferences/mpud/>). It appears they are also increasingly popular in everyday suburban life, meeting an apparently burgeoning consumer demand (Ministry and Bajracharya, 1999) and intersecting with residents concerns for privacy, safety and property values. Master-planned estates (or MPEs) have become similarly popular across western Sydney, as will become evident in the examples we use throughout this paper.

Our purpose in this paper is to undertake a critical engagement with existing Australian understandings of MPEs, and in particular the characteristics to which researchers draw attention. This critical exploration is conceptually guided by the notion of the post-suburban city. Definitively derived from a Californian, Los Angeles-focused imagination, this notion suggests the physical and social fragmentation of the city and a dispersed, polycentric urban form (Kling et al., 1991; Soja, 1997; Dear and Flusty, 1998). The dangers of extrapolating to a generalised understanding of contemporary urbanisation processes from a model taking Los Angeles as its archetype have been well rehearsed (e.g. McCann, 2002). Yet, while much empirical research remains to be done on Sydney’s socio-spatial and morphological transformations to a (broadly) post-suburban form, there is enough evidence of its decentring and of the unevenness and differentiation of its connections into flows of income, communications and culture to suggest that the idea of the post-suburban, as an approach to understanding the city, has much to offer in that it suggests a complexity to urban structure, mobilities and sociabilities *across the*

¹ **Acknowledgments:** We thank Natalie Moore and Helene Mountford for their research assistance.

breadth of the city. It is this potential that we apply here in attending to emergent suburban complexities in Sydney.

We begin with a brief discussion of the American lineage of the MPE phenomenon and the way it has directed the attention of Australian researchers to MPEs' privatisation and privatism rather than collectivism. We then draw on some preliminary research into the format of MPEs in the Greater Metropolitan Region of Sydney to draw a more complex picture; one that suggests that attention also needs to be paid to the diversity of, first, the governance processes that guide MPEs and, second, of the built forms they take and, third, of the nature of collectivism that takes shape within them. We conclude by returning to the historical and geographical specificity of the twenty-first century Australian suburb, suggesting that contingent continuities may be just as significant as disjunctures. In terms of the post-suburban approach, then, our treatment of MPEs stresses the need to be alert to the importance of differentiation and context in understanding contemporary urbanisation processes and the ways in which they are written on and through urban socio-spatial landscapes.

Contextualising the MPE Phenomenon

Although the building of new, large-scale, residential communities has been part of Australian suburbia across the twentieth century (see Richards, 1990; Peel, 1995), recent MPEs can also be traced to developments in the United States. With a long history of suburban community building by private developers (see Weiss, 1987), various forms of MPEs have risen to prominence in the United States over the past three decades: whilst there are no definitive statistics, 10% of new residential development is estimated to occur within some form of MPE (Low, 2001). One form is gated communities: privately owned, privately governed estates, defined by resident-only access to communal infrastructure and facilities and by distinctive bounding and securitisation of the development, physically through gates and road closures (Webster, 2002; Blakely and Snyder, 1997). Approximately 7 million households are now estimated to live in such walled developments (Sanchez and Lang, 2002). A second form is new urbanist developments like Disney's Celebration in Florida, or Laguna Beach in California. Design elements that replicate the spatial form and domestic architecture of the nineteenth century town characterise new urbanist developments, as does a mixture of commercial, employment and leisure land uses and hence (in theory) a more walkable and liveable neighbourhood. A final form is common-interest developments: developed and planned by a private developer rather than state agencies, and subsequently governed by non-government or private associations of residents and homeowners. Certainly these forms overlap. For example, a common-interest development can be gated, and new urbanist developments can be privately governed, such as the role of Disney Corporation in Celebration. The variability of the North American MPE belies the sometimes sweeping assumptions that are made about their impacts and outcomes.

The emphasis of Australian research suggests MPEs are predominantly large scale, integrated housing developments produced by single development entities that include the provision of physical and social infrastructure. They are predominantly located on the 'growth frontier' of the city's fringe though are also increasingly to be found on sizeable urban renewal sites (Minnery and Bajrachayra, 1999; Gwyther, 2005; Gleeson, 2005; Yigitcanlar et al., 2005). Within that broad definition, Australian MPE researchers work

with the notion of a spectrum relating to the intensity of master-planning (see Gwyther, 2005; Muirhead et al., 2004; Blair et al., 2003; Yigitcanlar et al., 2005). At one pole of the spectrum is the conventional planned estate where development complies with an overall vision of design and layout, often maintained through restrictive covenants on house and landscape design features. Somewhere in the middle fall lifestyle estates where physical and social amenity, often in the form of recreation or leisure facilities, are provided to support particular lifestyle options. At the other pole is the master-planned *community*, where the strategic intention and scope of master-planning is intensified through place-making approaches and often a socio-legal framework aimed at producing 'community' as a social code and value system amongst residents. At this end of the spectrum, extensively planned integrated development, incorporating physical and social infrastructure, are frequently complemented by programs of community development and various forms of 'community compact' (including behavioural [as opposed to design] covenants) used to mastermind social interaction and nurture community sentiment, binding residents and developers to the vision and localised practice of 'community'.

A post-suburban take on suburbs, at its most productive, is alert to the importance of geographical difference and context. Many Australian urban researchers are hence highly conscious of the potential dangers of applying such concepts to the unique institutional, socio-political and cultural conditions that have shaped Australian urbanisation and, more specifically, its suburbanisation (see Horvath, 2004; Randolph, 2005). However, despite this *theoretical* recognition of diversity, the American experience has influenced the empirical focus of Australian understandings of these new residential forms. Specifically, Australian work to date has focused almost entirely on the MPEs to be found at one end of the spectrum: those rightly called master-planned *communities*, predominantly a large-scale, outer suburban greenfield phenomenon (e.g. Muirhead et al., 2004; Rosenblatt, 2005). There are good reasons for this. These master-planned communities (and we consciously change the nomenclature here to MPCs) are large in scale: populations of 20-30 000 are not unusual (see Bosman, 2003; Minnery and Bajracharya, 1999). Their concentration on the city fringes means they connect to a host of specific and immediate planning challenges: the roll-out of adequate services, integration into the established urban fabric, environmental sustainability, the development of social attachment to place and community in greenfield contexts. In many ways they are the obvious starting point for research. But a major drawback of this research emphasis is that we are still without a real grasp of the diversity of the MPE phenomenon, of the variety in the structures of provision and governance arrangements that frame development in various parts of the spectrum, and of the likely forms of sociability they may engender.

Similarly, analysis of these MPEs shares common ground with a distinctive dystopian strand of US-literature that has addressed a range of residential enclaves serving residents united by common interest, by lifestyle preference, or by the desire for securitised living (see Davis, 1992; Knox, 1994; Judd, 1995). The most influential work here has been Blakely and Snyder's (1997) *Fortress America*, the title portraying its focus on developments that are materially, psychologically or symbolically gated to produce enclaves actively resisting or at least largely unconcerned with being imbricated into a broader urban fabric and public realm. Here there have been close case studies of long-established large-scale MPEs concerned, respectively, with their existence as exclusionary social formations (Gwyther, 2005) and as potential instrument of governmentality—carriers of strategies and tactics capable of rendering their populations quiescent and governable (Bosman, 2003).

Gleeson's (2003, 2005) work in particular shadows this dystopian vision of the MPE, positioning them as expressions, simultaneously, of privatism and privatisation². *First*, they are read as expressions of incivility, signalling a retreat to an ethic of privatism amongst a populace concerned to distance itself from a broader urban collective marked by income, ethnic and value difference. Distancing occurs by means of self-selection to a 'habitat' governed by design and behavioural norms. MPEs, as havens of class-filtered suburbia, make an attractive proposition to those seeking homogeneity, social distinction and—in a climate where a discourse of urban disorder and fear is rampant—security and protection. The non-resident can be designed out of these exclusionary communal formations. *Second*, they are instantiations of a neo-liberal retreat from the universal provision of public infrastructure. MPEs habitually involve, under a variety of arrangements, the private financing, provision and/or management of community amenities and infrastructure and often result in their exclusive use by estate residents, either *de jure* under community title or *de facto* under the psychological and/or symbolic impacts of their design and layout. The genuine public realm is made vulnerable or erased in either case such that, for Gleeson, MPEs represent a departure from the social democratic commitment to a democratic public sphere underpinned by equitable access to fundamental 'public' amenity and services. Together, then, privatism and privatisation, are seen to lead inevitably to the emaciation of the public sphere.

Australian research thus far then has drawn predominantly on a limited scope of inquiry and a particular tradition of urban studies which has sustained speculative and anxious conclusions about MPEs' impacts on social cohesion and urban civil society. We want to suggest that broadening the scope of research to incorporate the diversity of forms of master-planned estates occurring in and around Sydney may reveal other conclusions: conclusions that suggest Sydney's post-suburban socio-spatial formations may not, and certainly will not of necessity, reflect the U.S. experience.

Recognising the Complexity of MPEs in Sydney

In what follows we want to broaden the focus of research on MPEs, and in particular to identify other characteristics and processes that warrant exploration and are suggestive of suburban variety in an Australian post-suburban context. Our suggestions are guided by three different theoretical departure points. We are firstly guided by contemporary theories of governance that remind us that the governance of urban spaces, and in particular planning processes, are neither simply private, nor simply public, but hybrid mixtures of both. Pauline M^cGuirk's analysis of metropolitan strategies for Sydney, for example, reveals a continuing and strong presence of state and local government as agents of urban change at the same time as the withdrawal or dampening of some state capacities (M^cGuirk, 2005). Hybrid governance processes also evident in the United States. Ann Forsyth (2002) shows, for instance, that in Irvine, California (which was a key influence on early post-suburban thinking) the hand of the Irvine Corporation was strongly felt. But also influential were Federal decision on taxes and State legislative oversight of university location. Theoretically, then, we need to be alert to the continuing prevalence of state capacity and its relations to capitalist organisations.

² Though more recently Gleeson (2005) has attended to the potential of MPEs, given the large scale on which they are planned, to recast the Australian suburb in more sustainable mode.

We are, secondly, guided by a recognition of suburban complexity: that the suburban landscape is constituted by a multitude of built forms, neighbourhoods and demographic characteristics (Dear and Flusty, 2005; Mee and Dowling, 2000; Randolph, 2005). This recognition, emerging clearly from a post-suburban framework, means that a focus on just one form of MPE is inappropriate. We need to be alert to the diversity of suburban residential forms and development processes.

Thirdly, we begin with the premise that new residential neighbourhoods are complex and multi-layered places which hence require both quantitative and qualitative analysis. There is a select, but now dated, tradition of studies of new neighbourhoods in the Australia literature that bears this out (Bryson and Thompson, 1972; Richards, 1990) but the growing importance of MPEs demands renewed attention. Our feeling is that the social formats they give rise to and the qualities of neighbourhood and community they sustain, cannot easily be generalised but require both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Already ethnographies of neighbourhood have proven to be especially useful in demonstrating the complexity of MPE social formations. In Australia, Gwyther's (2005) research underlines the exclusivity of some such communities, whilst in the US Andrew Ross' ethnography of Celebration suggests the overlapping of exclusiveness and inclusiveness (Ross, 2002). All these theoretical guideposts, in sum, direct us to the importance of empirical research. Thus we insist on the addition of a fourth entry point; one of empirical inquiry. Here we draw on our own exploratory empirical study in which we have sought to establish the extent, form and variety of the MPE phenomenon across the Greater Sydney Metropolitan Region³. This work included a survey of local government planning departments as well as an extensive search of media, land development and residential construction corporations and local government websites. It is far from exhaustive, and has so far not included any ethnographic detail. Nonetheless, preliminary analysis of the information provides revealing insights, particularly into aspects of the governance and diversity of MPEs in both Sydney and western Sydney. In the following, we focus on western Sydney and highlight, particularly, diversity in design, location, built environment and governance processes. We do so as a means of suggesting that the impacts of MPEs on urban (putatively) post-suburban life across Sydney are likely to be manifold.

Diversity in Design, Location and Built Environment in Western Sydney's MPEs

Large-scale greenfield developments are certainly a common, but not the only, residential type that is the subject of master planning in western Sydney. Master-planned communities include Camden's Harrington Park (3000 dwellings) and the forthcoming Marsden Park (700 dwellings) in Campbelltown, as well as a series of other suburban MPCs being developed across the region by Landcom, the state government's corporatised residential property development vehicle. Various forms of *retirement communities* are also widespread. The Retirement Village Directory (www.itsyourlife.com.au/villages_nsw.asp) lists 241 different retirement villages in Sydney alone, without considering the Central Coast, lower Hunter or Illawarra. An

³ In confirmation of the range of MPE formats and of the vastly divergent ways in which seemingly similar terminology is applied, an encyclopedic audit is neither feasible nor necessarily useful, given that Sydney's rate of residential expansion would render it outdated almost instantaneously. Nonetheless a scoping exercise is helpful to ground our sense of the nature of the phenomenon and its variability.

additional form of MPE that seems specific to the outer western and southwestern fringes of Sydney is rural residential sub-divisions, such as in Wollondilly Shire. These involve the master-planned development of sizeable residential lots around communal agricultural land and rural amenities held under community title by residents who are attracted by the lifestyle aesthetic but not its workload. Finally, although nowhere near as common as in the United States, we do see gated communities in western Sydney, such as Macquarie Links in Campbelltown.

We would also point to the increasing importance of brownfield redevelopments in the western Sydney context. The conversion of old industrial sites to residential uses has been a key component of the NSW Government's urban consolidation policy, and the presence of 'surplus' government land across western Sydney (e.g. former Lidcombe Hospital, ADI site) has drawn the region into this form of residential development. Typically these sites are master-planned because of their size and their concentrated ownership structure and tend to be in Sydney's 'forgotten' middle-ring suburbs (Randolph, 2002). In just one municipality – Auburn – more than 7,000 new dwellings are expected in future brownfield MPEs. The existence of these developments has two implications. First, that these are much more likely to be mixed use developments than have so far been common in western Sydney, encompassing commercial, educational and employment facilities as well as residential. They are also far more likely to have mixed housing types, and perhaps some socio-economic diversity in terms of tenure and household type. Their contribution to the development of lives lived without reference to a monocentric city structure is likely to be significant. A second and related implication is that these developments highlight the urbanity of the suburbs. Developments such as Holroyd Gardens (at Holroyd, West Central Sydney) perhaps share just as much with Landcom's Victoria Park redevelopment (at Zetland, inner Sydney) as they do Stanhope Gardens (at Blacktown, West Sydney). It is a master-planned 'new town' community but one that will be integrated into its surrounding *urban* fabric and, most probably, its surrounding established communities.

Hybrid Governance Processes Producing MPEs in Western Sydney

Though extant international and Australian research emphasises the role of private developers in creating MPCs this is not necessarily the case. More interventionist planning and policy contexts, such as that of NSW, are likely to result in the planning and delivery of MPEs involving extensive engagement of local and state government authorities. In NSW for instance, there is a history of creating State Environmental Planning Policies (e.g. SEPP 26, SEPP 56, SEPP 59) which require the master-planning of sites within specified Sydney regions. Moreover, local government authorities have been enthusiastic advocates of the use of master-plans as a mechanism for enhancing existing planning instruments⁴. Some councils (e.g. Randwick City Council, the City of Sydney) have required the production of master-plans for all developments above a

⁴The term master-plan refers to a loosely defined mechanism of planning regulation over an entire site which produces an overall vision to guide development. The level of detail in that vision can vary enormously as can the scale at which it operates, from an entire suburb to a site for a few dozen dwellings. When the state government formed a Master-plan Review Taskforce, the Property Council of Australia's (2003) submission complained that it was 'not clear what a master-plan actually means as the definition in the regulations are broad and what is required of master-plans ranges for different sites and council areas on the whim of the Council. The proliferation of local governments' deployment of master-plans in multiple ways resulted in the amendment of Environmental and Assessment Regulation 2000 as part of the 2005 reform of the NSW planning legislation. While Councils are now restricted to using DCPs or requiring Stated Development Approval process, their ability to intervene in what is commonly understood as a master-planning process remains strong.

defined size. Others have used the Development Control Plan instrument to produce their own site-specific master-plans which are then enacted by private developers (e.g. Hornsby's Westleigh Precinct DCP). As an additional master-planning approach, many authorities have required a staged development approval process for large residential developments wherein a general concept master-plan is considered by the planning authority before more detailed, phased applications for development approval are accepted. Not surprisingly then, local governments have been inclined to endorse master-plans as a means of achieving the integrated and holistic development of sites, securing the timely delivery of social and physical infrastructure, and enhancing their ability to meet local authority development objections across their jurisdiction.

Indeed, the position and experience of some western Sydney councils is suggestive of co-existence of the enabled and disabled state evident through the development of MPEs. One council, for example, refused, or were deemed to refuse, at least two MPEs in their jurisdiction because of their lack of consideration of heritage and density planning principles. One development went ahead after being approved by the Land and Environment Court, whilst the other is still in negotiation. This council is skeptical of MPEs, not only because of threats to their planning principles, but also because of concerns around social exclusion. For a neighbouring council, however, MPEs have been embraced, with a partnership between council and a developer resulting in a MPE of approximately 400 dwellings. Moreover, a large number of master-planned estates across Sydney have been more directly publicly-driven. Landcom now focuses its activities on the delivery of master-planned estates in partnership with private developers. It is currently in the process of developing 26 estates of various scales across the Sydney GMR. The process involves close monitoring of the detail of development applications by private developers.

Crucially, this means that master-planned development does not necessarily mean a diminution, through privatisation, of the public capacity to oversee and shape the direction of MPE development. Instead, the Sydney example indicates that a variety of governance mechanisms are used to shape their delivery in ways that blur the notion of public/private, state/market dichotomy (also see Forsyth, 2002 and Gleeson, 2005). MPEs do not necessarily involve a process of privatisation but, rather, can involve complex and hybrid forms of regulation that guide their planning and delivery and their relationship to the public realm. Clearly, the policy context for MPE development and the form and content of public-private collaboration involved in their planning and delivery is critical to the form the MPE takes and fundamental to its integration with the direction of broader strategic development within its environs.

When it comes to collective infrastructure and service provision, in the Sydney case, widespread privatisation appears to be a rarity, confined to the more fully gated examples. In terms of the nature of amenities and facilities within the development, these range from relatively modest, shared recreational amenities to more complex systems of services and commercial infrastructure provision. Our scoping exercise has thus far revealed that while there are closed-access community title facilities within individual building complexes there are also extensive publicly owned and maintained, public-access parklands, walking and cycle tracks and picnic areas. Newbury, (now called Stanhope Gardens), is a good example here. In it we certainly find private, resident-only facilities like a club house and tennis courts. But it is also the case that Newbury houses Blacktown's newest and most modern swimming centre that is valued and used by a

much broader socio-economic group dispersed beyond the suburbs' boundaries. Finally MPEs may develop private governance structures at the community level (e.g. body corporates) to govern communal property and enforce adherence of restrictive covenants and, increasingly, to manage and nurture the process of community development within the estate. These can be sponsored by the MPE developers or contracted by residents for management by private firms rather than organised publicly. In the Illawarra's Hayward Bay development, for example, a consulting firm has been contracted to initiate a community group and establish connections among residents (Singer, 2005). Stanhope Gardens similarly has a 'community relations officer' and 'community newsletter' sponsored by the developer. In the absence of any detailed ethnographic work, the outcomes of these neighbourhood governance strategies in terms of the collectivities and forms of sociability they sustain, are still to be determined.

Conclusion

Clearly there is much more that we need to know about MPEs before we can reach any definitive conclusions about the changing nature of residential development in suburban Australia. Nonetheless, we would like to use the argument we have developed in this paper to make two comments that we think should guide future research. First, that there is a clear case for broadening the research agenda on MPEs to incorporate the variety of forms they take and the suburban complexity they may engender. A better understanding of diversity will be crucial to understanding the broader effects MPEs have on critical dimensions of urban sociability, social diversity and inclusion, the parameters of socio-spatial differentiation and, ultimately, the depth of the collective life of cities. We strongly suspect that master-planned estates, the forms of sociability they sustain, the impact they have in shaping socio-spatial differentiation, their imbrication in the extension of civic privatism and, ultimately, their impact of the public sphere of urban life is over-determined by the diversity we suggest above. Grasping this will require us to expand our research focus beyond the current focus on suburban MPCs to include their multiple forms and locales across the contemporary city.

Second, we are intrigued that much attention (including ours) has been directed at MPEs because of their apparent novelty: a new residential form, new development processes, new suburban lives created. But are they as new as has been suggested? In being struck by their apparent novelty, their historical difference, have we overlooked historical continuities (see Atkinson and Blandy, 2005)? We know, for example, that those seeking home ownership and a more secure future for their children have long made the suburbs their home, sometimes in socially exclusionary ways. It is equally evident that both developers and the state have, over the past fifty years, employed various mechanisms to encourage or create ties among residents of new estates (see Richards, 1990; Bryson and Winter, 1999). In addition to the attention to geographical diversity we have called for in this paper, we end by suggesting, then, that much more careful historical specification of MPEs, their governance, and their practices of neighbouring, is also required. For us, these are the keys to developing a robust post-suburban understanding of Sydney: theories that are historically and geographically sensitive and partnered with careful empirical work.

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